Using Campus Ethnography to Reveal Social Inequality

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In 1944, 70 year-old Ira Johnson settled in a home at 311 Bright Street in Indianapolis, Indiana. By the time of his death 30 years later in 1974, the University had acquired most of the property around Johnson's home, leaving his house only one of the two that were still standing amidst a sea of parking lots. As his obituary, which was published in the *Indianapolis Recorder*, Indianapolis' African-American newspaper, noted, the noise and other disruptions necessitated by the construction of a new law school immediately adjacent to his property had made it unpleasant for Mr. Johnson to continue spending his days, sitting on his front porch and watching the world go by. "He did not like the noise, the machinery or the people moving about" the author of the obituary wrote. "So he refused to sit on the porch and watch progress. He liked it even less when a parking lot came up to his back fence. The house offered him security and comfort, so his last days were spent in his home, his last hours in his chair. As he sat there, he entered into eternal sleep." [PHOTO #1]

This poignant story is one of many that we have uncovered that reveal the history of our campus, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, and its legacy of displacement. This multi-method project utilized oral histories conducted with surviving African Americans elders, who had experienced forceful relocation to make way for the campus, resulting in a 2010 collection edited with a community elder, The Price of Progress: IUPUI, The Color Line, and Urban Displacement. A rich cache of digital resources illuminate changes in Indianapolis' urban landscape, including local newspapers, Sanborn Insurance Maps, and Polk City Directories that reflect the too-often submerged and neglected stories of the once-vibrant African-American neighborhood that was dispossessed 50 years ago. In addition to consulting these historical sources, our students have also participated in Mullins' summer archaeological field schools, which are held on or adjacent to our campus, where they have uncovered important artifacts, lurking under the asphalt pavement of prosaic parking lots or in the modest backyards of the closest residential neighborhood just to our north, Ransom Place, that tell the story of segregation and Black life prior to the 1960s. [PHOTO #2]

These days, most anthropology programs include the option, if not the requirement, for students to participate in an ethnographic methods course or in an archaeological field school. In addition to teaching such methods courses, many of us also incorporate various other kinds of research projects into our other teaching endeavors. Such teaching methods are often favored by administrators who consider them examples of High Impact Practices—teaching strategies that keep students engaged—and enrolled. In this paper, we wish to share our experiences of doing these kinds of research projects with our students on the IUPUI campus and on another campus where Hyatt was previously employed. Through those experiences, they come to understand how our institutions are deeply implicated in patterns of racial segregation and uneven development across the landscapes of our cities.

This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Hyatt, S. B., & Mullins, P. R. (2019). Using Campus Ethnography to Reveal Social Inequality. General Anthropology, 26(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/gena.12050

It seems ironic and disturbing that this call for us to use High Impact Practices like student research projects, and, indeed, the emphasis on civic engagement more broadly, coincide with the ascendency of White supremacy in our public and political discourse. The rollback of legal protections passed during the Civil Rights era, along with fraught and incendiary debates about immigration policy have revealed the extent to which movements such as nativism have been reinvigorated and re-energized. Many of our campuses have been targeted with leaflets and fliers, advocating for racist organizations and causes.

As anthropology professors, most of us will surely address these issues in our classrooms. What we are suggesting, however, is that we use our ethnographic methods and archaeological field schools (where appropriate) and other class projects to help students uncover and unpack how our campuses and universities (in many cases) have historically been – and in many cases, continue to be -- complicit in such unsavory trends as displacement, economic precarity, and the insidious expansion of the carceral state.

Back in 2003, Hyatt was on the faculty at another urban university, Temple University located in north Philadelphia. That spring, the students in her Ethnographic Methods class examined the history of the densely populated, predominantly African-American blocks surrounding the main campus. The fieldwork was undertaken collaboratively with a local community development corporation, (Renaissance Community Development Corporation- RCDC) whose dynamic leader, Paula Peebles, worked very closely with Hyatt and her students to facilitate the semester-long project, "The Death and Rebirth of North Central Philadelphia."

As the class was beginning the research, Hyatt realized that there was a long history of this community and its relationship with Temple that she and the students needed to understand. Not only was Ms. Peebles able and willing to share her knowledge of the neighborhood with the class; they also discovered that she had been a key activist in many of the struggles that had shaped community-university relations through the years. The class agreed that one of their goals in doing this work was not only to document the history of the neighborhood; it was also to present those findings in a form that would be easily accessible to the community. In collaboration with the RCDC, the class decided to publish a neighborhood newspaper that would be made up of articles written by the students based on their research. Initially, the plan was to have a four-page insert that would be included in one of the local Black weekly newspapers; however, by the time the project was completed, the students had written and compiled enough material to produce and distribute 10,000 issues of their own tabloid-size 24-page neighborhood newspaper throughout the 60 or so city blocks that made up the RCDC's service area.

At the time when that fieldwork was being carried out, Temple was in the early stages of creating more student housing and other local amenities intended to make the blocks surrounding the university more attractive to students from the suburbs and out-of-state, and to create a setting that would more closely resemble a bucolic, self-contained campus. A few years before the class began, two major clashes between Temple and its neighbors had

revived a long history of conflict. One was a controversy generated by a proposal to permanently close 13th Street to vehicular traffic, thereby separating campus space from the surrounding neighborhood through creating a pedestrianized precinct. This plan was successfully opposed by neighborhood residents who had already been inconvenienced enough through two years of campus construction projects and their resulting street closures, and 13th Street was eventually re-opened to traffic. (For a detailed account of the Death and Rebirth project, see Hyatt 2015). [PHOTO #3]

The second initiative was Temple's plan to erect a huge sports and entertainment complex on the Western edge of the campus. Originally called "The Apollo of Temple," the facility was later re-named The Liacouras Center following the retirement of President Peter Liacouras from Temple in 2000. The new Liacouras Center was built on the west side of Broad Street; since Broad Street had long constituted the western boundary of the campus, this represented something of a further incursion into what had long been perceived as non-university community space. In addition, the arena was located at the corner of Cecil B. Moore Avenue and Broad Street, an intersection that had once been known as "Jump Street" and which had once constituted the heart of the Black arts district. The name "Liacouras Center" indelibly marked the space as an extension of the campus. The arena was built over the remonstrations of community residents.

The construction of the Liacouras Center was a key victory in President Liacouras's long-standing desire to see the neighborhood around the campus turned into what he called "Temple Town," a commercial and residential zone that would provide new housing, retail, dining and entertainment, all aimed at attracting students and other young people who would now see this African-American neighborhood that had long been reviled by the public as an impoverished "ghetto" rebranded as a new hip urban frontier. In his desire to have the community surrounding the campus reinvented as "Temple Town," President Liacouras and his successors were emulating other universities that had created "destination neighborhoods" in the blocks thronging their campuses. On the west side of Philadelphia, for example, the University of Pennsylvania had renamed the community where it was located, "University City." Real estate and commercial developers began to use the moniker "Temple Town to market new housing and economic development projects and the character of the neighborhood began to change. Several years after the completion of the Death and Rebirth project, community residents had something of a small victory when they mounted a successful campaign to get Google to remove the name "Temple Town" from digital maps of the community.

All over the country, there are similar stories of campus construction and expansion that have erased prior community histories; often those histories included stories of the Black neighborhoods in particular that had previously occupied these spaces. With students and faculty often having access to newly digitized resources, in addition to our use of interviews and oral histories, researching and documenting these stories often uncover affecting accounts of lives uprooted, as universities have undergone massive growth since the post-World War II period.

A few years ago, in teaching our department's senior capstone course and in talking with students about career paths they might pursue with their degrees in anthropology, we began to discuss the precarious nature of employment in the current economy. The students agreed to a small research project interviewing some of the people who work on our campus to find out more about their conditions of employment. One of the groups spoke with the food service workers who are employed at our Campus Center. The students discovered that, as is true on most campuses, these service workers, mostly Black and Hispanic on our largely White campus, are not actually employed by the university but are subcontracted and receive few or no benefits. In their conversations with the food service employees, the students uncovered a situation that the instructor, Hyatt, had not been aware of: that is, because we do not offer many face-to-face courses over the summer, there are very few students on campus so our food service workers are largely laid off for two months, then re-hired when the new academic year begins. Because they are laid off for a relatively short time, with the guarantee of being rehired, they are ineligible to claim unemployment benefits and face two months every year with severely constrained resources. A campus organization, Students for Fair Wages, had been working on this and other issues related to campus employment policies, and Hyatt encouraged the students in the class, who had been moved and concerned by their interviews with the workers, to get involved.

More recently, Hyatt taught a class on Cultures of Incarceration. One of the issues we looked at was access to education for people both while they are incarcerated and after their release. Through doing research on university admissions policies for people who have felony convictions, we discovered that our campus had among the most restrictive and challenging admissions requirements for people with criminal records who are hoping to matriculate.

The class project was to organize a conference, called "Building a Prison-to-School Pipeline," a play on the more commonly known phenomenon, the School-to-Prison Pipeline. The School-to-Prison Pipeline references research that suggests that the use of harsh disciplinary measures in public schools, levied disproportionately on Black and Latino youth, sets them on a path to incarceration, beginning with their initial entanglements in the juvenile justice system. In the "Cultures of Incarceration" course, students met with formerly incarcerated individuals and heard about the struggles they encountered through the process of re-entry, including access to higher education and training.

We examined admissions application forms from schools around Indiana and discovered that Indiana University (and its affiliates, which would include our campus), asks applicants to disclose not only whether they have ever been convicted of a crime but whether they have ever been *charged* with one. Replying "yes" to that question triggers a series of additional questions and further examination by a "behavioral review committee," whose exact membership we have been unable to ascertain. We discovered that there was no clear policy on the procedures for evaluating the applications of formerly incarcerated students and because of that, such applicants received inconsistent messages and instructions from the admissions counselors they consulted.

The conference that the class organized attracted about 120 attendees. All of the keynote speakers were formerly incarcerated individuals, many of whom spoke about their experiences with education while they were in prison and their desire to continue with their schooling after release. As part of the class activities, we had visited several re-entry programs and students met with and interviewed formerly incarcerated individuals. Students had heard their stories and felt compassion for this population and frustration on their behalf about the barriers they faced. In fact, one group of students designed a "re-entry board game," illustrating the challenges that confront individuals newly released from prison. [PHOTO #4]

One of the individuals whom we met through the conference is about to complete his Associate's degree at our local community college. (The community college does not require any criminal disclosures in their application). Through some of the networks we created through the conference, with campus staff and administrators, there are people now working to assist this prospective student as he wends his way through an unwieldy admissions process. But there are likely to be others in this situation whom we do not know and who will not be able to access our assistance, mandating that we keep working to get in place a fair and transparent process in place for evaluating the applications of formerly incarcerated students.

These are a few of the ways in which we can engage our students in understanding the complex roles that many of our universities have played in reproducing class and racial inequalities. Additionally, conducting ethnographic fieldwork or archaeological digs on or in close proximity to our campuses obviates logistic challenges such as transportation to and from research sites. But, more importantly, these projects are a way to get students to see that the banal campus landscapes they encounter on a daily basis are rife with submerged residues that speak to the heritage left behind by the earlier occupants of these sites. The question that remains at the end of these projects is what our institutions will subsequently do with this work.

Mullins' on-going project on the history of IUPUI campus has revealed a complex story about "the racial and class privileges that made university expansion possible and now have rendered it rather invisible, even as many of these institutions now experience a tension between the willingness to face up to their institutional complicity in urban renewal and simultaneously continue spatial expansion" (Mullins and Jones 2011, 251). IUPUI has recognized the importance of this work in a number of ways; for example, an exhibit now installed on the ground floor of our new Science Building, entitled, "Welcome to the Neighborhood! Recognizing Those Who Were Here Before" tells some of the stories of previous residents. The exhibit, however, is rather anodyne, eliding the actual violence of the removals of these same individuals from campus space. Mullins is a popular speaker on campus often sharing his research on campus history in public forums. A recent presentation to incoming and prospective students, however, was followed by a visit from an administrator, who was concerned that perhaps the presentation did not send the right message to that particular audience.

Hyatt left Temple for IUPUI at the end of 2004; as far as she knows, the university never recognized the "Death and Rebirth of North Central Philadelphia" project and, as indicated, conflicts with the neighborhood have continued to escalate since that time. IUPUI is now part of a new nascent initiative called "16 Tech," a planned "innovation district" that will extend the footprint of the school to the northwest, into another predominantly Black neighborhood called Riverside. It remains to be seen whether the university has taken on board the lessons of the past in how it will handle the impact this new development is likely to have. Whatever happens next, this new initiative offers our students another opportunity to examine and document how this development will affect another neighborhood that lies in the path of its current expansionist ambitions, and to call attention to what are likely to be its multiple and complex consequences.

References

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Photos

Photo #1: Mr. Johnson's house at 311 Bright Street, surrounded by parking lots being constructed for the IUPUI campus. (Photo courtesy of the IUPUI Special Collections and Archives)

Photo #2: Students involved in one of the summer digs sharing their findings with neighborhood residents.

Photo #3: Coalition to Stop the Closing of 13th Street Flier. (Image courtesy of the RCDC Archives)

Photo #4: The Re-entry Board Game designed by students in the "Cultures of Incarceration" class. (Photo courtesy of Angela Herrmann)